1990s: New special effects, independent films, and DVDs

Cinema admissions in 1995

The early 1990s saw the development of a commercially successful independent cinema in the United States. Although cinema was increasingly dominated by special-effects films such as Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991), Jurassic Park (1993) and Titanic (1997), independent films like Steven Soderbergh's sex, lies, and videotape (1989) and Quentin Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs (1992) had significant commercial success both at the cinema and on home video. Filmmakers associated with the Danish filmmovement Dogme 95 introduced a manifesto aimed to purify filmmaking. Its first few films gained worldwide critical acclaim, after which the movement slowly faded out.

Major American studios began to create their own "independent" production companies to finance and produce non-mainstream fare. One of the most successful independents of the 1990s, Miramax Films, was bought by Disney the year before the release of Tarantino's runaway hit Pulp Fiction in 1994. The same year marked the beginning of film and video distribution online. Animated films aimed at family audiences also regained their popularity, with Disney's Beauty and the Beast (1991), Aladdin (1992), and The Lion King (1994). During 1995 the first feature length computer-animated feature, Toy Story, was produced by Pixar Animation Studios and released by Disney. After the success of Toy Story, computer animation would grow to become the dominant technique for feature length animation, which would allow competing film companies such as Dreamworks Animation and 20th Century Fox to effectively compete with Disney with successful films of their own. During the late 1990s, another cinematic transition began, from physical film stock to digital cinema technology. Meanwhile DVDs became the new standard for consumer video, replacing VHS tapes.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_film#1990s:_New_special_effects.2C_independent_films.2C_and_DVDs>

Films of the 1990s

Two seminal events of 1989 helped set the course for film in the 1990s.

First, a talky, micro-budgeted film by an unknown director won the audience award for best film at the Sundance Film Festival.

It was subsequently bought by a little-known outfit called Miramax Films, ushering in the era of the independent film

"sex, lies and videotape" became more powerful than a speeding locomotive as Hollywood set out to find the next Steven Soderbergh.

That same year, Sony Corp., the Japanese consumer electronics giant, purchased Columbia Pictures, ushering in the era of vertical integration, corporate values and synergy.

Suddenly, the same corporate parent owned a film production, distribution and exhibition company, not to mention the print and television media that flogged the products.

The consequences of both events played out in the 1990s.

Hollywood has become increasingly corporate even while luring the latest hot young independent talent.

Indeed, with mavericks like Miramax either coming under some other studio's corporate umbrella or disappearing altogether, the very term "independent" has come to mean less and less.

But that doesn't mean that first-time filmmakers don't blast out of nowhere with a film that throws audiences for a loop and turns Hollywood on its ear: Mr. Soderbergh, meet the "Blair Witch" boys.

Nicely bridging the two trends, computerization has had as huge an impact on the movies as it has on every other aspect of our lives.

In some ways it has added to the synthetic feeling of the worst of corporate product.

In others it has put the means of production and marketing more easily in artists' hands, making good on Francis Ford Coppola's prediction that everyone will someday be able to make a movie.

For now, here's a look at how the 1990s changed movies and how we watch them:

1991: "Terminator 2: Judgment Day," is released, starring Arnold "I'll be back" Schwarzenegger.

But the real star of the movie is the evil cyborg T-1000, played alternately by actor Robert Patrick and his computer-generated doppelganger.

For the first time, a digital character is just as convincing as his human counterpart.

Morphing, which has previously been seen in the ill-fated "Willow," becomes a movie staple.

Two years later "Jurassic Park" finishes what "T2" started, convincing audiences and the industry that digital images can be scary and convincing even in close-up.

Two years after that, "Toy Story," the first computer-animated feature-length film, makes the digital revolution virtually complete.

1992: A former video store clerk from Los Angeles arrives at the Sundance Film Festival with his first movie, "Reservoir Dogs," whose stylized violence, pop-culture references, hip soundtrack and ensemble cast of great character actors startles critics and audiences.

Soderbergh's heir is anointed.

Two years later Quentin Tarantino fulfills that early promise with "Pulp Fiction," a sprawling post-modern epic that makes $100 million at the box office.

Meanwhile the fractured narrative structure, manic dialogue and speedy editing of "Pulp Fiction" inspire thousands of imitators (for good and for ill), reignite the flagging career of John Travolta, ensure Miramax's status as a Hollywood player and introduce the concept of independent films crossing over to a mainstream audience.

1995: In Dallas, AMC Entertainment opens the Grand Theatre, a 24-screen theater that introduces the term "megaplex" to the American vernacular and becomes the first theater in the country to feature stadium seats and ceiling-to-floor, wall-to-wall screens.

The race is on to build theaters with the most screens and amenities (the biggest today is the 30-screen, 5,924-seat Mesquite Theatre in Dallas).

Although the Grand promises to play independent and foreign fare, it quickly abandons smaller films to play only Hollywood products.

Independently owned theaters and art houses increasingly become a thing of the past.

Also in 1995: For the first time, Hollywood's international gross box office revenue matches its annual domestic receipts, suggesting that the era of ancillary markets is upon us.

Audiences would notice an uptick in movies featuring less dialogue and more action, as well as Happy Meal tie-ins, as a movie's success in American theaters takes a back seat to such lucrative areas as overseas release, home video, television rights and merchandising.

1996: A hip, ironic take on the slasher movies of the 1970s and 19, starring a bevy of young, attractive television stars, wows its teen audience and reminds anyone that culture consumers are living in a pediocracy.

Made on a bare-bones budget but with just the right amount of attitude, "Scream" launches a flotilla of sequels and imitators, including "Scream If You Know What I Did Last Halloween" (currently renamed "Scary Movie"), an ironic take on the slasher movies of the 1990s.

1997: African Americans make significant strides on screen and off, as Will Smith becomes the star to beat in "Men in Black" (hot on the heels of "Independence Day" a year earlier); actor Samuel L. Jackson produces "Eve's Bayou," one of the most highly acclaimed movies of the year; and record producer Babyface Edmonds produces "Soul Food," a warmly observed drama-comedy about a black family in Chicago.

1998: Internet surfers find a Web site devoted to an obscure legend about a Maryland witch, and a full-blown cultural phenomenon is born.

Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, who filmed "The Blair Witch Project" in rural Maryland with little money but loads of imagination, had no idea that their tiny movie, filmed mostly on video with three unknown actors, would have a chance to be picked up by a major studio.

So they create the ingenious site to drum up grass-roots interest.

They succeed.

By the time "The Blair Witch Project" hits theaters in the summer of 1999, the want-to-see factor has long surpassed mere hype.

Now one of the most profitable movies of all time, "The Blair Witch Project" brings back the idea that what's in filmgoers' heads is much scarier than the most graphic monster.

And it puts the ballyhoo back in film marketing.

It also proves that a kid with a video camera and access to a computer can create his or her own media frenzy.

1999: Theater owners from around the nation witness digital exhibition for the first time at an annual meeting in February.

Clips from a computer hard-drive are shown beside the same images projected from film, to mostly good reviews for a steady, bright and sharp image.

But reports of a digital revolution may be overstated.

Theater owners and studios are still squabbling over who would pay to retrofit theaters to accommodate the new delivery systems, and enterprising film stock companies and entrepreneurs are busily coming up with a more sophisticated celluloid product that would make digital a nonstarter.

In any event, within the next few years, audiences can anticipate seeing movies in a whole new light.

<http://www.columbia.edu/~sm3031/places/film-12c_90s.html>

The Decade of Money, Mega-Spending and Special Effects:

In the 1990s for the most part, cinema attendance was up – mostly at multi-screen cineplex complexes throughout the country. Although the average film budget was almost $53 million by 1998, many films cost over $100 million to produce, and some of the most expensive blockbusters were even more. In the early 1990s, box-office revenues had dipped considerably, due in part to the American economic recession of 1991, but then picked up again by 1993 and continued to increase. The average ticket price for a film varied from about $4.25 at the start of the decade to around $5 by the close of the decade. As indoor multiplexes multiplied from almost 23,000 in 1990 to 35,600 in the year 2000, the number of drive-ins continued to decline (from 910 in 1990 to 667 in 2000).

There still existed an imbalanced emphasis on the opening weekend, with incessant reports of weekly box-office returns, and puffed-up reviews and critics’ ratings. The belief was sustained that expensive, high-budget films with expensive special effects (including shoot ‘em-ups, stereotypical chase scenes, and graphic orchestrated violence) meant quality. However, the independently-distributed film movement was also proving that it could compete (both commercially and critically) with Hollywood’s costly output.

Pressures on conventional studio executives to make ends meet and deliver big hit movies increased during the decade. Higher costs for film/celebrity star salaries and agency fees, spiraling production costs, promotional campaigns, expensive price tags for new high-tech and digital special-effects and CGI (computer generated images), costly market research and testing (to develop risk-averse, formulaic, stale, and over-produced films), scripts created by committee, threats of actor and writer strikes, and big-budget marketing contributed to the inflated, excessive spending (for inferior products) in the Hollywood film industry. True character development, interesting characters, credible plots, and intelligent story-telling often suffered in the process.

**High-Cost Demanding Stars:** In the mid-1990s, perks and the excessive demands of mega-stars sometimes reached epidemic proportions for many of the highest-paid stars (including Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tom Cruise, Sylvester Stallone, Mel Gibson, Eddie Murphy, Kevin Costner, Harrison Ford, Robin Williams, Jim Carrey, Demi Moore, Julia Roberts, and others). They often demanded script approval prior to filming, directorial and other casting choices, approval of the use of images for publicity, restrictions on film scheduling, studio-paid personal and entourage jet travel, various ‘extras’ (such as a personal gym and trainer/nutritionist, limo service), their choice of the positioning of credits (for example, above the title and in relation to other stars), the inclusion of nudity and other ‘body-related’ clauses, and final-cut approval. For example, at one time, Jack Nicholson wouldn’t agree to filming during LA Lakers’ basketball home games, and Harrison Ford, Kevin Costner and Tom Cruise would have the studios pay for their private jets. To promote her film Ghost (1990), Demi Moore (who earned the nickname Gimme Moore) traveled with a bodyguard, masseuse, hair stylist, cosmetician, fashion consultant, and an assistant (who had an assistant). Reportedly, she ordered studio chiefs to charter two planes for her and her entourage while promoting both of her flop movies Striptease (1996) and G.I. Jane (1997). Her support staff for the freely-adapted $50 million film The Scarlet Letter (1995) was no different, while the movie bombed and earned only a small fraction of its budget. And Julia Roberts (with a $10 million salary) ordered the studio to have a jet ready in London to fly from Pinewood Studios back to the US for the weekend during the making of Mary Reilly (1996), at a cost of more than $41,000 per month–for approximately three months. It became clear that once stars were earning multi-million dollar salaries, a director and a studio could easily lose control of the film, especially when the demanding star was also one of the film’s producers. Ironically, however, a highly-paid star in a big-budget film didn’t guarantee a film’s success.

**The Digital Age and Home Viewing:** The VCR was still a popular appliance in most households (about three quarters of them in 1991) and rentals and purchase of videotapes were big business – much larger than sales of movie theater tickets. Rather than attending special film screenings, members of the Academy of Motion Pictures viewed Oscar-nominated films on videotape, beginning in 1994. The signs of the burgeoning of the digital age portended revolutionary change. In 1990, Kodak introduced the Photo CD player. And in 1992, the Second Edition of the 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary, was also made available on CD-ROM. By 1992, broadcast TV was beginning to lose large numbers of viewers to cable-only channels.

<http://www.m4movies.com/the-history-of-film-the-1990s/>